

Illinois Commission on the Elimination of Poverty
Full Commission Meeting, September 26, 2011
Held in Chicago and Springfield via Teleconferencing

MEETING MINUTES

Attendance:

Rev. Dr. Sid L. Mohn, Commission Co-Chair – President, Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights
Michelle Saddler – Secretary, Illinois Department for Human Services
Al Riddley – Executive Director, Illinois Coalition for Community Services
Andy Kulczycki – Community Service Center of Northern Champaign County
Robyn Gabel – State Representative
Sandra Pihos – State Representative
Eithne McMenamin – Senior Policy Analyst, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless
Dan Schwick – Assistant to the President, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois
Terry Solomon – Executive Director, Illinois African American Family Commission
Marisol Morales – Illinois Latino Family Commission
Mike Jones – Special Assistant to the Director for Healthcare Policy, Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services
Veronica Cunningham – on behalf of Diane Williams, Safer Foundation
Cheri Neal Ditzig – Zion Township
Sandy Matthew – on behalf of Maria Whelan
Kim Drew – Policy Associate, Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights
Amy Terpstra – Associate Director of the Social IMPACT Research Center, Heartland Alliance
Patty Pensa – Policy Aide, Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights
Jennie Sutcliffe – Assistant to the Deputy Governor, State of Illinois
Madeline Talbott – Action Now and Raise Illinois

I. Update on Public Hearings

Al Riddley provided a summary of the Aug. 24 public hearing in Marion and the Sept. 7 public hearing in Springfield. He called the Marion hearing a “good beginning” with about 10 people testifying and highlighted the large turnout in Springfield, where about 20 people testified.

In response to Sid Mohn’s question about surprising recommendations and input, Al mentioned the conversation about both hearings about hunger and food needs; generational extreme poverty; multiple families living in the same home; and homelessness, which was particularly mentioned at the Springfield hearing.

Eithne McMenamin, who attended the Marion and Chicago meetings, noted the lively engagement in Marion but wondered if more advanced preparation would have increased turnout. She commended Al for encouraging participation.

At the Chicago hearing, during which 21 people testified, Eithne reported that several people discussed food insecurity, especially regarding full-time students who cannot get SNAP benefits. She highlighted testimony about making benefits programs more accessible, particularly through the city colleges, and the positive feedback about the Put Illinois to Work program.

II. Discussion and Motion to Approve Annual Progress Report

Kim Drew mentioned that poverty measures may be adjusted in future reports to better capture the impact of the Commission's recommendations.

Terry Solomon questioned the term "customized" to describe definition of poverty in the report. Amy Terpstra acknowledged there are better words to describe it, such as "alternate," and noted the definition used in the report includes income sources such as food stamps and the EITC. Sid offered the term "comprehensive" and Amy suggested "more comprehensive" would be best.

Terry also asked for a breakdown of extreme poverty by subgroups such as minorities. She said that breakdown is what legislators want to see. After some discussion, the group agreed that because all groups are experiencing an increase in extreme poverty, adding subgroup information should not result in any group claiming the issue does not pertain.

Amy added that including children, seniors and the disabled in subgroup information would be important because those groups comprise almost half of those in poverty.

Concerning the report, Sid complimented the use of quotes from the public hearings, saying they gave the document soul. He said the food and hunger theme was not highlighted enough and needed to be strengthened. Others agreed, mentioning testimony about the need for community gardens.

In response to discussion about adding research from other states, Sid suggested sending Kim examples for use in future reports. The group discussed plans for releasing the report, which involved outreach to the media and sending the edited report to state legislators.

The report will be edited according to the earlier discussion:

- Using "more comprehensive" to describe the poverty measure
- Adding breakout graphs for the rate of extreme poverty by race, ethnicity, age and disability
- Enhancing the section on food and hunger testimony
- Adding rationales for recommendations without them

Rep. Pihos cautioned about the timing of the report's release so it doesn't get pushed to the "bottom of the pile in Springfield." Sid said the report should go out by the end of the weeks with a second distribution during Veto Session.

In response to Michelle Saddler's question about what is needed to get legislators to read the report, Rep. Gabel suggested adding a line to an email or cover letter indicating the report contains "ideas for possible legislation."

Terry made a motion to accept the report with suggested edits. The motion was seconded by multiple people and approved unanimously.

III. Veto Session Planning

Rep. Gabel reported that committees are planning to reconvene regarding the state budget passed last session. Members believe they did not have correct information at the time and want to restore funding from programs that were cut. She asked the group to offer one or two items that it believed should be considered for increased funding. The group agreed to request some level of funding for Transitional Assistance and for Child and Family Assistance, both of which were cut 100%.

Madeline Talbott of Action Now & Raise Illinois shared her group's efforts to raise the minimum wage, pointing to the state's history of support for increasing it, surveys that suggest almost three-fourths of the state supports the move and economic analyses that show the state would not lose jobs as a result.

In response, Sid said the Commission's Making Work Pay group should connect with Raise Illinois. Madeline suggested organizing a press conference for Veto Session and offered to help.

Veronica from the Safer Foundation provided for an update on "Ban the Box" legislation. She said more educational outreach efforts need to be made to get the bill passed. Jennie Sutcliffe said a change could occur with administrative approval instead of legislative approval, especially considering the predominance of electronic job applications for state employment.

Sid suggested the Poverty Commission's Steering Committee should look at the structure of working groups to identify any needed changes.

IV. Presentation and Questions on Census Bureau's Latest Poverty and Income Data Release

Amy provided an overview of the latest data with a PowerPoint presentation. She highlighted the country's record poverty level, the highest in the 52 years that the data has been collected. In addition, median household income is at its lowest level since 1996. Without government safety net programs, the numbers would be worse.

Amy's PowerPoint slides have been emailed to the Commission.

V. Next Steps

Terry referred back to the idea of a press conference in Springfield, perhaps using some of the slides in Amy's PowerPoint. Sid offered the idea of educational outreach sessions with legislators to share the Poverty Commission's work.

In closing, Sid reviewed the edits to the Annual Report and the plan to release it by the end of the week. He asked for a draft letter to legislative committees on restoring funding to Transitional Assistance and to Children and Family Assistance during Veto Session. He asked that the Commission work with Raise Illinois on legislative strategies and possibly a press conference. Sid also asked for a calendar for Veto Session and dates for future Poverty Commission meetings.